

Fresh optimism for HK films

Hong Kong's movie industry should make the most of emerging young talent, relatable storytelling and new technologies

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The film industry in Asia will continue to boom, thanks to the advancement of cutting-edge technologies, according to Chang Long Jong, member of the Singapore Media Festival Advisory Board. Being part of this growing ecosystem, the Hong Kong film and television industry stands to benefit too, even as it finds and develops its own niche, he said.

Chang was speaking at the Singapore Media Festival — an international event for showcasing some of the finest new work in film and television from across Asia — which ran from Nov 23 to Dec 3. His optimism about the Hong Kong film industry, once billed as the Hollywood of the East, is based on the emergence of the young up-and-coming directors on the scene.

At the forefront of a new wave of rising talent is director Wong Chun, whose award-winning debut *Mad World* is Hong Kong's official entry to the 2018 Academy Awards in the Best Foreign Film category.

Chang's suggestion to filmmakers of Wong's generation was to either seek collaboration opportunities on the Chinese mainland or "base their creations on the unique Hong Kong flavors".

"The Chinese mainland has a sizable market and is rich in funds, talent and ideal locations for film shooting," said Chang, who believes China has the potential to outdo Hollywood in terms of prevailing over the world's movie markets.

Hadi Wahyuni, executive director of the Singapore International Film Festival, said the Hong Kong film industry has experienced a downward slide in recent years, partly due to funding coming primarily from mainland producers, leading to Hong Kong filmmakers tailoring movies for the mainland market. The presence of Hong Kong's local identity has become diluted as a result and the end product does not quite ring true, he added.

Making "small-budget, localized films" could be a way forward for Hong Kong filmmakers, said Chang, as content based on the local culture is likely to strike a chord with the local audience.

Citing Wong's *Mad World* — starring Hong Kong favorites Shawn Yue Man-lok and Eric Tsang Chi-wai — Chang said the film's strength was in being able to communicate the distinct local elements to a wider audience. Taiwan's *Our Times*, Thailand's *Bad Genius*, and *Dangal* from India, have resonated with audiences from other cultures for the same reason, he added.

Rob Gilby, chairman of the Sin-



Movie award winners at the recent Singapore Media Festival. The international industry event showcased new work in film and television from across Asia.

PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY

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Co-program leader of Cinematic Design and Photographic Digital Art at the Open University of Hong Kong

gapore Media Festival Advisory Board, echoed Chang's sentiments regarding the presence of top talent in Hong Kong, to say nothing of the city's rich cultural heritage which could form the basis for writing outstanding stories.

Gilby encouraged Hong Kong's filmmakers and screenwriters to reinvent existing films, including the classics that were a hit elsewhere in Asia, and retell the same stories with local characteristics. His suggestion was to look for themes that might resonate across cultures. "Struggles of life, loss and love are universal things that people can share and bond over," he said.

According to Man Shu-sum, a Hong Kong-based member of the Singapore Media Festival Advisory Board and also a teacher at the Academy of Film at Hong Kong Baptist University, the films which succeed at the box office are either about themes the audiences can relate to or are completely different from their own situation.

The recent box-office hit *Wolf Warrior II* directed by Chinese actor-director Wu Jing belongs in the former category. While the film is set in Africa, it portrayed a spirit of patriotism and bonding between comrades that resonated with Chinese audiences.

Fung Bing-fai, the co-program leader of Cinematic Design and Photographic Digital Art at the

Open University of Hong Kong, said closely watching what the millennial generation likes might help toward delivering a potential hit.

"Since the younger generation takes the biggest share of the market, their changing viewing habits are an important factor in the equation," Fung said.

This new generation of consumers in the digital age has created a new viewing culture. They want instant access and like to multi-task even as they are watching a show online.

"The rise of video-on-demand applications and content providers further propel the film and television industry to transform on a cultural level," said Fung. People were increasingly indulging in binge viewing — that is, spending hours watching back-to-back episodes of a television series.

Fung's colleague Tin Lai-man added that younger audiences tend to get bored with linear plotlines, the reason being "their thinking pattern tends to be fragmented".

Matt Dewees, sales manager of Autodesk, Southeast Asia, shared insights into the application of virtual reality in creating content for film and television. Autodesk is a US corporation specializing in making software for manufacturing, architecture, media and entertainment industries. Not content with simply watching films, people want to interact and play with their favorite

characters in real time, said Dewees.

"Short feature films that are three to five minutes long have the greatest potential of all," remarked Dewees, who believes stories would be more compelling with the inclusion of virtual reality technologies.

Virtual reality application technology is a blessing, particularly for films to be made on a limited budget, being cost-effective and readily accessible. For instance, while the surreal and striking scenes of an alien world created in the 2009 Hollywood blockbuster *Avatar* cost millions of dollars to make, it is possible to achieve similar effects by applying virtual reality technology which would cost only about \$350, said Dewees.

Chang, who is also the CEO of mm2 Entertainment, a Singapore-based corporation specializing in online content production and filmmaking, is trying to do his bit toward helping new filmmakers from Hong Kong.

His Movie Makers project is inviting pitches from Hong Kong filmmakers. The best three pitches will each receive HK\$3 million (\$384,000) toward production costs. Mm2 has also collaborated with companies providing location services to filmmakers, such as the One Cool Film production company founded by actor Louis Koo Tin-lok.

Chang's goal is very simple — "to empower the new wave of young film talents" in Hong Kong.